DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 432 830 EA 029 982

AUTHOR Rowicki, Mark A.
TITLE Communication Skills for Educational Administrators.
PUB DATE 1999-08-00
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Effectiveness; Administrator Role; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Educational Administration; Elementary Secondary Education; *Interpersonal Communication; Listening Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Strategies

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews and discusses the literature related to improving effective communication in educational settings. It compiles possible solutions to ineffective communications. To promote effective communication, administrators need to solicit opinions and be willing to listen to them. Most administrators tend to give direction instead of guidance, so they need to listen more, ask more questions, and encourage faculty members to come up with their own ideas and solutions. School leaders should also learn how to control their emotions and concentrate on what is being said. Likewise, since every organization has both formal and informal lines of communication, the idea of following a strict chain of command is unwise. Administrators can enhance communication by using the most effective and efficient line of communication, depending on the situation at hand. Such efficient communication may involve the use of the latest technologies, such as local area networks; school leaders should set an example in using these technologies to bolster communication. Overall, administrators are the educational focal point within the school or local community, and they must be able to communicate effectively any concerns, ideas, or news. (RJM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 432 830

Running Head: COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATORS

Communication Skills for Educational Administrators

Mark A. Rowicki

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
M. Rowicki
1

EA 029 952

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Introduction

Communication is at the heart of education. Principals communicate with teachers, teachers communicate with students, and students communicate with each other. The paths for communication are as diverse as they are numerous, yet this is also the source of many problems that arise within schools. One critical area of interest is the communications that take place between principals and their faculties. Since they are key players involved in the normal day-to-day operations of a school, their ability to effectively communicate cannot be overstated.

Wentz (1998) states that effective communication involves more than speaking. People communicate by writing, listening, and using non-verbal signals to get their message across. What people don't say while speaking could be just as important as what they do say, and how our body language supports or refutes what we are saying could mean the difference between communicating and just speaking. Administrators, according to Laud (1998), spend the vast majority of their days communicating. How they address their faculties can set the stage for effective communications within a school.

Keeping the lines of communication open in a school setting means a two-way interaction. Bolman and Deal (1993), recommend administrators ask for verbal feedback to determine how they are really seen by their faculties. They must keep in mind that feedback may not always be positive, but it should still be accepted and acknowledged. Maintaining a positive attitude is essential in effective communications. O'Neil (1998, p. 28), states that "A person's communication effectiveness is directly proportional to his or her attitude." If administrators stand in front of their faculty with their hands folded across their chests, a frown on their faces, and say, "My door is always open if you have a problem," few people will take that as a warm invitation to come in and talk. The actions belie the words.

If school leaders want open, effective communications between themselves and their faculties, they must take the initiative by setting the example they want to see. This paper reviews and discusses the literature related to improving effective communication in educational settings. The premise is to compile possible solutions to ineffective communications that have been effective in other educational settings.

Discussion

John Landers, the new principal at Fuller Elementary School held his first faculty meeting in the cafeteria the first day of pre-planning week. The faculty was assembled waiting to hear what their new boss had to say. Landers walked in, read several announcements, described his ideas for the coming year, and gave them their marching orders. He outlined the problem areas in the school and told the faculty what he wanted them to do to correct the problem. He left the meeting thinking it had been successful. His faculty left feeling frustrated and unhappy. This scenario is a reality in many schools around the country (Bolman & Deal, 1993). The meeting may have been successful in disseminating information, but hardly successful in terms of communication. According to Wentz (1998, pg. 113), "An understanding of the importance of communication is significant to the success of the educational administrator." Principals need to be aware that the message they convey non-verbally and in their tone or actions is just as important as the words they speak. In the above scenario the principal assumed he knew what needed to be accomplished without talking to any of the teachers or making first-hand observations of normal day-to-day operations. His comments were offensive to some teachers who felt he was talking down to them and did not value their experience and professional judgment. In this case, the principal failed to keep the lines of communication open.

If an administrator wants effective communication then he or she needs to open it up. Bolman and Deal (1993) suggest spending time with people getting to know them, listening to what they have to say and considering their feelings and goals before coming to any conclusion. One veteran teacher asked a new principal during his first faculty meeting "... Shouldn't you get to know this school and how we do things before you tell us how to teach?" (Bolman & Deal, 1993, pg. 9). The principal in question jumped to conclusions about the school climate without consulting or considering the teachers. A good administrator will also ask for feedback. This is something that may be difficult for many administrators since the feedback can be viewed as an attack on them personally. However, without good feedback an administrator will never really know how he or she is perceived by the faculty (Bolman & Deal, 1993). In the case of John Landus, the faculty's first impression of their new principal was of a tyrant who gave orders but asked no questions. Because he did not get faculty input, Landus was at odds with his people before he ever began.

Another method for opening communications is by learning how to listen and guide instead of direct. Administrators tend to give direction instead of guidance. Laud (1998) says more than three-fourths of an administrator's day is spent communicating, and it is essential that administrators learn how to talk with staff members. When a teacher asks for advice, he or she expects an administrator to listen and provide guidance. Unfortunately, specific directions for solving a problem are often given instead. People are capable of reading to find textbook solutions to problems, but when seeking advice they are asking you, "What did you do?" or "What do you think about this?" When an administrator responds with directions, however well intended, people may feel good about the solution, but at the same time inferior due to their

inability to generate their own solution (Laud, 1998). Administrators should do more listening and probing when talking with faculty members to get them to come up with their own ideas and solutions. Instead of telling, the principal can ask, "What ideas have you come up with?" "What do you think would be the best route to take?" A good enhancement to improving interpersonal communications is a positive attitude.

O'Neil (1998, pg. 28) states that "... 90 to 92 percent of a person's daily communication is based on attitude." Administrators who develop and portray a positive attitude in dealing with people and situations set the stage for building a positive environment. They do not overlook all the good one has accomplished to concentrate on a single negative incident. If administrators look hard enough they can find something good in almost anything, learn from it, and build on that to see things from a positive point of view. O'Neil (1998) states that attitude and communication are linked, and the connection provides ideas for learning how to improve both such as role playing, case studies, and modeling.

Another part of learning how to communicate effectively involves learning how to control our emotions and feelings. This concept is called suspension. When we suspend, we are putting our feelings and emotions on the back burner and concentrating on listening carefully, thinking about what is being said, and trying to avoid any personal conflict (Garmston & Wellman, 1998). Often people become defensive when they believe people aren't listening or not understanding their point of view. The urge to display anger or become emotional needs to be squelched for fear of alienating or angering the group or person speaking. So effective communicators suspend their feelings and emotions, or hold them back, and concentrate on the communications at hand.

Administrators should also be aware of communication channels within schools and different methods of communicating. Every organization has both formal and informal lines of communication, and schools are no different. The idea of following a chain of command set in stone for all communications is unwise and unrealistic. Good administrators will use the most effective and efficient line of communication depending on the situation at hand (Wentz, 1998).

That could be going directly to the source or relaying the message through other people; the sensitivity and situation will dictate the appropriate chain. For instance, a new teacher may not understand the procedure for obtaining supplies. Having the department chair drop by to explain the procedure face to face is more effective than sending a memo. Along this same line are different modes of communication. With schools being networked and technology advancing at a rapid pace, the old method of writing a note or walking to a person's room is rapidly becoming outdated. Administrators need to be familiar with many different types of technology available for use in communication. Technology such as word processors, e-mail, local area networks (LANS), and FAX machines are all excellent means of communicating within a school. Administrators can take the lead in getting faculty members to jump on board the technology bandwagon through example. Wentz (1998) argues that it will improve administrator's communication skills, and also set a good example for the faculty and staff in using technology to communicate with the administrator and each other. However, nothing can take the place of a face-to-face visit or a smile to communicate a sense of welcome or belonging.

Conclusion

The typical school leader must be a master of many trades with communication skills being near the top of the list. Since the administrator is the educational focal point within the school or local community, he or she must be able to effectively communicate any concerns,

ideas, or news within and between the two realms. As Wentz (1998, pg. 113) puts it, "The effective principal is to be a communication center for the educational hub of the future." With the future only a day away, the success or failure of a school will depend on how effective an administrator can communicate with the changing world.

References

Bolman, L. & Deal, T. (1993). The path to school leadership: a portable mentor. Newberry Park, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

Garmston, R. & Wellman, B. (1998). Teacher talk that makes a difference. Educational Leadership, 55, (7), 30-34.

Laud, L. (1998). Changing the way we communicate. Educational Leadership, 55, (7), 23-25.

O'Neil, S. (1998). An empowered attitude can enhance communication skills. Business Education Forum, 52, (4), 28-30.

Wentz, P. (1998). Successful communications for school leaders. NASSP Bulletin, 82, (601), 112-115.